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IMMIGRATION POLICY AND ELECTORAL MANDATES

DO EXECUTIVES KEEP THEIR PROMISES ON MIGRATION POLICY?

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SUMMARY

Debates on migration policy often assume a gap between what is said and what is done – a phenomenon known as the discourse-policy gap. This perspective suggests that governments “talk tough” on migration to appeal to voters but fail to follow through, either by taking little action or enacting more moderate policies. This report examines this claim by assessing how well government representatives fulfill their electoral promises on migration policy. Focusing on France and Germany, the analysis consists of two steps: (1) identifying migration-related pledges in the electoral manifestos of French presidents and German ruling parties, and (2) evaluating whether these pledges are fulfilled. Contrary to the notion that migration policy is uniquely prone to unfulfilled promises, our findings indicate that a substantial proportion of immigration-related pledges are enacted. This holds true across different political systems: in France, where presidents have fulfilled about 71% of their pledges (2007-2022), as well as in Germany, where the more complex context of coalition governments did not prevent ruling parties from delivering on about 58% of their electoral commitments (2005-2021). Moreover, we find no clear differences in pledge fulfillment across policy domains (entry/exit policies vs. integration policies) or ideological orientation (restrictive vs. liberal pledges). Overall, these results suggest that migration policy is not an exceptional policy area characterized by systematic non-fulfillment; governments seem to follow through on their promises much like in other policy areas.

1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

Immigration is one of the most contested and polarizing issues in today's Western democracies. The rise of illiberal forces has, to a significant extent, been attributed to anti-immigrant sentiment, the increasing salience of public concerns over immigration, and the perceived inability of mainstream political forces to respond to such concerns (Oesch 2008; Dennison/Geddes 2018; MIDEM 2018). Indeed, advocates of stricter immigration policies often complain that elites sustain liberal policies that are significantly out of step with the majority's desire for lower numbers and stricter controls (Freeman et al. 2013). This is in line with a longstanding scholarly debate on the alleged tension between public opinion – often favoring stricter immigration policies – and public policies that are either more liberal or that fail to attain their restrictionist aims. Even if scholars of party competition have shown that political parties have adopted increasingly restrictive stances on migration (Alonso/da Fonseca 2011; Dancygier/Margalit 2021), research on the general evolution of migration policy still finds that, in contrast to what the public and political mood could suggest, the overall trend has been one of policy liberalization (Helbling/Kalkum 2017; de Haas et al. 2018). Restrictionist tendencies, instead, are only found in specific sub-fields, most notably in border control policies (for a review, see Mendes 2023; see also SVR 2024).

These discrepancies were already apparent when Hollifield (1992) introduced the influential concept of the “liberal paradox” –, a term used to describe the conflicting pressures that liberal states face when designing immigration policies. On the one hand, public opinion – along with concerns over national identity, security or social cohesion – is generally considered to push governments toward a restrictionist stance. On the other hand, economic and legal imperatives compel states to open their labour markets to outsiders and to protect migrants' rights in accordance with international human rights norms and liberal constitutional principles. Hampshire (2013) captures

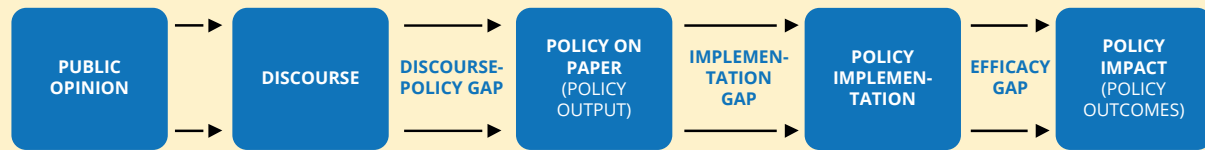
all these tensions when arguing that the *capitalist* and the *constitutional* facets of the liberal state tend to promote inclusion, while the *democratic* (i.e., public opinion) and *nation-state* (i.e., national identity) facets drive exclusion.

These tensions help explain the perceived gap between discourse and action in the field of migration policy. As democratic governments are under pressure to prioritize national audiences, the tendency might be to over-promise and to adopt a more restrictive rhetoric. This is particularly true in the lead-up to elections. Yet, once in office, policymakers are faced with numerous other constraints. These include the abovementioned economic interests, legal obligations, and international commitments, which often lead to more inclusive policies than campaign rhetoric would suggest. This has led scholars to speak of a *discourse-policy gap*, in reference to the disparity between, on the one hand, restrictive public demands and political rhetoric, and, on the other hand, the more liberal policy outputs ultimately produced (Czaika/de Haas 2013; Lutz 2021).

Despite being a leitmotif in migration policy research, empirical contributions assessing the *discourse-policy gap* remain sparse (for a notable exception, see Lutz 2021). This research deficit is all the more surprising when focusing on electoral pledges – one of the most concrete and visible aspects of political discourse. What parties promise during elections is crucial for democratic representation and accountability. Electoral pledges not only give citizens a way to shape future public policy but also serve as a benchmark for holding incumbents accountable. Yet despite the widespread interest in democratic deficits in migration policy, we still know remarkably little about the extent to which governments actually deliver on their migration-related pledges.

This question is all the more relevant when considering that general research on party mandates and pledge

Figure 1: Synopsis of the different policy gaps



Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

fulfillment has consistently shown that, contrary to the widespread view of parties as promise breakers, governing parties do fulfill a considerable proportion of their electoral pledges (Thomson et al. 2017; Naurin et al. 2019). Despite variation across different contexts, comparative research has shown that executives invariably fulfill more than half of their promises – sometimes significantly more than half (see Thomson et al. 2017). Does this pattern hold for migration policy? Or is the gap between what is said and what is done particularly evident in this domain, as migration scholars suggest?

To be sure, policy gaps extend beyond the discourse-policy gap examined in this study. There has been some conceptual ambiguity in the past, with scholars using the notion of “gaps” to refer to different dimensions of the policy process. For example, much debate has centered on the gap between a policy’s intended goals and its actual capacity to achieve those goals and regulate migration as intended (Hollifield et al. 2022; Czaika/de Haas 2017; Brekke et al. 2016; Helbling/Leblang 2018). This is often referred to as the *control gap* or *efficacy gap*. In a contribution that has shed much light on conceptual debates, Czaika and de Haas (2013) distinguish between three types of gaps: the discursive gap (the disjuncture between discourse and policies on paper); the implementation gap (the disparity between policies on paper and the way they are implemented); and the efficacy gap (the extent to which implemented policies affect migration). Others have added to this list the *opinion-policy gap*, adding the public opinion dimension to the equation (Morales et al. 2015; Lutz 2021). One key takeaway from this discussion is the need to clearly differentiate between different dimensions or stages of the policy process – (1) public opinion, (2) discourses, (3) policies on paper (policy output), (4) policy implementation and (5) policy outcomes (or policy impact) (Figure 1). This is crucial not only to prevent conceptual fuzziness, but also to avoid the risk of overestimating policy gaps or policy failures. This is why when focusing on the *discourse-policy gap*, it is more appropriate to focus on policy output (as opposed to policy impacts), not least because policy impact is dependent on implementation and a range of other factors.

2. MEASURING THE PLEDGE-POLICY GAP

In order to accurately estimate the gap between what politicians promise and what they do, we followed the empirical literature on party mandates and pledge fulfillment and proceeded in two straightforward steps, consisting of: (1) the identification of electoral pledges on immigration in the electoral platforms of ruling parties; and (2) the assessment of the level of fulfillment of each pledge (e.g., Royed 1996; Mansergh/Thomson 2007; Thomson et al. 2017). In line with this literature, we use electoral manifestos as the source of our data, as these are the most authoritative and comprehensive documents detailing parties’ commitments. We chose to focus on ruling parties only as these have a greater impact over the policy process.

Pledges are defined as statements committing a party to carry out certain actions or achieve certain outcomes; commitments that have to be specific enough to allow us to determine whether they are fulfilled or not after the election (Thomson et al. 2017). In other words, what determines whether a statement qualifies a pledge is the *testability* of the promised action or outcome. If a statement is vague and its fulfillment cannot be tested without making subjective assumptions about what it actually means and what fulfillment would entail, then it is not considered a pledge, but mere rhetoric. To give an example, “we will strictly apply the principle of secularism” is a rhetorical statement, whereas “we will organize university training in secularism for ministers of religion” is a pledge.

Despite these seemingly clear criteria, existing methodological discussions show that scholars do not always operationalize pledges in the same way, with some having narrower understandings than others (see Thomson et al. 2017’s appendix). In this study, we opted for a middle-ground approach: we do not limit ourselves only to sentences that promise a specific course of action (the *narrow approach*), as this would exclude many potential pledges; instead, we also consider statements that can be fulfilled in multiple ways, and only excluded those that required a significant degree of subjective interpretation on

our side. To ensure reliability, we conducted an initial inter-coder reliability test, in which two coders independently categorized 244 statements. The agreement rate was satisfactory, at 75%. Nevertheless, we chose not to rely on a single coder for pledge identification. Instead, three coders categorized each statement in the dataset and discussed them in case of doubt or disagreement.

Similarly, we opted to have at least two coders contribute to the evaluation of pledge fulfillment. Fulfillment was coded into three main categories: *fully fulfilled*, *partially fulfilled* or *unfulfilled*. Additionally, we included an *undetermined* category to account for the few cases in which fulfillment could not be clearly determined. A pledge is considered fulfilled when concrete measures are taken and approved that correspond to what was pledged, or when the promised outcome is achieved. It is classified as partially fulfilled when the measures taken or the outcomes achieved fall short of what was promised. The evaluation of pledge fulfillment is based primarily on policy output – that is, specific measures or actions. Fulfillment is assessed in terms of outcomes (results) only when the pledge itself does not mention any action, but instead promises a specific outcome only. Such actions or outcomes are only considered if they occur during the tenure of the government in which the party that made the pledge was in power (i.e., if a pledge is enacted by a subsequent government, it is not counted as fulfilled). To determine fulfillment, we relied on a broad range of primary and secondary sources, including legislation, ministerial decrees, governmental reports, official statistics, journalistic accounts, etc.

In addition to this, we also categorized pledges according to two other criteria. First, we assessed each pledge in terms of ideological orientation or *restrictiveness* – that is, whether the proposed changes (would) make the existing legal framework more or less restrictive. Following the criteria of the DEMIG dataset (de Haas et al. 2015), we judge restrictiveness based on whether the proposed measures restrict or enhance the rights and opportunities available to migrants. We used three categories: *more restrictive*, *less restrictive* or *not applicable*. The main goal of this categorization is to examine whether the purported disjuncture between *tough talk* and *weak action* results in some way from policymakers finding it easier to implement liberal (less restrictive) pledges compared to restrictionist ones.

Second, we also categorized pledges based on whether they pertain to *entry/exit policy* or *integration policy*. While

both are key aspects of immigration policy, they represent two distinct dimensions: the former refers to measures regulating migrants' access to the territory and their status as legal residents, whereas the latter concerns the terms of migrants' incorporation into the host society, once they are present in the territory. Integration policy includes a variety of different aspects, from access to citizenship to access to public and social services. This classification will allow us to assess whether our cases align with existing evidence suggesting that parties have a greater room for action in integration policy (Givens/Luedtke 2005; Lutz 2018, 2021). As integration policy is more a matter of domestic politics – and less subject to the type of legal constraints that exist in admission policy (particularly when it comes to family reunification and asylum) –, it is logical to expect that pledge fulfillment rates will be higher in this case. Both this classification and the categorization of pledges by restrictiveness posed no reliability issues, with coders achieving an agreement rate above 90%.

Finally, since our goal is not only to assess pledge fulfillment in migration policy but also to estimate how it compares to other policy areas, this study also draws on secondary sources that have calculated overall levels of pledge fulfillment for the same cabinets. For this, we used both journalistic and academic sources. While this comparison should be made with caution (as different studies do not always have the same pledge identification criteria), it provides a first approximation as to whether the limited fulfillment of the electoral mandate is more evident in migration policy than in other areas or if migration scholars have been overestimating the uniqueness of the migration policy democratic deficit.

To the best of our knowledge, this study constitutes the first test of the discourse-policy gap – or, more precisely, the manifesto-policy gap – using the more fine-grained method we propose here. While Lutz (2021) also examined this gap empirically, his analysis is based on highly aggregated manifesto data, providing only a rough estimate of party's general positions. Whereas this approach has the advantage of enabling comparisons across a wide range of cases, it has limitations when the goal is to accurately estimate the program-to-policy link. Additionally, given potential concerns that Lutz's method may systematically overstate the negativity of party positions, we think it is worth reassessing whether "the purported democratic deficit in migration policy is substantially the result of a limited fulfillment of the electoral mandate by governing parties" (Lutz 2021: 174).¹

¹ Lutz himself acknowledges (ibid.: 183) that his analysis relies on rough measurements of parties' general positions. Specifically, his method assigns each cabinet a single immigration position score (-1 to 1) based on Comparative Manifesto Project (CMP) data. While useful for broad comparisons, this approach is limited when studying the program-to-policy link, as a single score reveals little about specific pledges or expected policies. Moreover, the reason we think Lutz's analysis might overestimate the negativity of party positions is that, in the absence of a dedicated immigration category in the CMP dataset, his coding relies on indirect proxies – such as "law and order" – which may skew scores downward. To test this, we recoded Macron's 2017 manifesto: using Lutz's CMP-based method, we identified 50 quasi-sentences on immigration, yielding a score of -0.72. A manual approach, however, found only 30 quasi-sentences and a score of -0.4, suggesting the CMP-based measure may inflate negativity.

3. COUNTRIES OF STUDY

This study focuses on France and Germany, two of Europe's core immigration countries. Both are host to the largest foreign-born populations in the European Union – Germany with more than 16 million foreign-born residents (approximately 20.2% of the total population), and France with over 9 million (around 13.6%) (Eurostat 2024a). While these two countries are known for having pursued two different models of migrant integration, they share a roughly similar postwar migration experience – with large-scale labour migration in the postwar period, a sudden halt to recruitment programs in the 1970s, the growing relevance of family reunification channels (alongside the realization that migration was not as temporary as governments intended), and an increased politicization of migration over time.

We chose to focus on “core immigration countries” – that is, countries with a relatively long history of immigration and with well-developed legislative frameworks in this regard – to ensure that the electoral platforms of ruling parties actively deal with immigration issues and to allow for an analysis across multiple cabinets over time. We cover a broadly similar time frame in both countries, encompassing three cabinets in France (2007-2012, 2012-2017, 2017-2022) and four in Germany (2005-2009, 2009-2013, 2013-2017, 2017-2021). We limited our analysis to these two countries due to the resource-intensive nature of the pledge-testing approach, but plan to expand the analysis to additional cases in the future.

That said, it is important to note that these two countries have distinct political systems and that we expect institutional differences to shape the manifesto-policy gap. Germany's parliamentary and federal system, geared towards consensus, contrasts with France's semi-presidential and centralized system, more majoritarian and top-down in decision-making. One particularly relevant distinction is that German governments normally take the form of broad coalition cabinets, whereas France's executive is dominated by the president (except during rare periods of *cohabitation*). These institutional differences are significant because it is logical to expect that the manifesto-policy link will be more diluted in the case of coalition governments, where policy priorities require greater negotiation and compromise. This is in line with prior research, showing that parties in single-party executives tend to fulfill a higher share of their electoral pledges than those in coalition governments (Thomson et al. 2017). Highlighting these dynamics allows us to situate our analysis within each country's institutional framework

rather than jumping to direct comparisons of fulfillment rates across the two countries. This should not be taken as a limitation, as our main goal is to assess the extent of the manifesto-policy gap within single countries.

In the case of France, this means prioritizing presidential manifestos, as the president plays a central role in setting the political agenda. While this is different during periods of *cohabitation* (when the president's party differs from the party holding the majority in parliament), our period of study does not include any such government. As a result, we chose to focus on presidential manifestos (rather than party manifestos for legislative elections), not only because of substantive considerations related to the president's powers, but also for the very practical reasons that – as the presidential race takes center stage – parties do not always issue separate legislative manifestos² and the bulk of public attention is on the President's pledges.

Finally, it should also be mentioned that French presidents and German parties have different styles of communication, approaching the task of manifesto-writing distinctively. This is partly expected, as presidential manifestos are more personalistic while party manifestos are typically the product of broad party consultations, making them more programmatic and extensive. Still, it is noteworthy that, despite their reputation for rhetorical flair and grand narratives, French presidents actually produce short and simple manifestos with straightforward and easily identifiable pledges. The opposite is true for German party manifestos, which are a lot more extensive and richer in prose. While this results in a much greater number of pledges, it also sometimes complicates pledge identification and testing (as the many broad commitments and intentions are often not translated into specific actions). Table 1 summarizes the key differences in manifesto length and the number of immigration-related pledges identified.

In what follows, we examine each case study separately, starting with France and then turning to Germany. Each chapter starts with an overview of our general results on pledge fulfillment in migration policy, followed by a brief comparison with secondary sources that have assessed overall levels of pledge fulfillment across all policy areas. We then delve deeper into immigration-related pledge fulfillment over time, analysing the record of each executive individually. We finish each chapter with an assessment of how fulfillment varies across policy area (entry/exit policies vs. integration policies) and ideological orientation (restrictive vs. liberal pledges). We conclude with key takeaways and avenues for further research.

² For example, En Marche (Emmanuel Macron's party) did not produce a manifesto of its own in 2017. Another problem is that, because presidential manifestos take centre stage, party manifestos are sometimes confidential or hard to find – this is the case for the legislative project of the Parti Socialiste in 2012 (François Hollande's party). We are grateful to Isabelle Guinaudeau for pointing this out to us.

Table 1: Manifesto length and number of pledges on immigration

	Manifesto Number of pages	Manifesto Number of pledges on immigration
France		
Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) (UMP – Union pour un mouvement populaire)	9	5
François Hollande (2012-2017) (PS – Parti Socialiste)	23	4
Emmanuel Macron (2017-2022) (En Marche!)	17	12
Germany		
1st Merkel cabinet (2005-2009)		
CDU/CSU	47	10
SPD	43	5
2nd Merkel cabinet (2009-2013)		
CDU/CSU	94	18
FDP	86	4
3rd Merkel cabinet (2013-2017)		
CDU/CSU	128	15
SPD	120	23
4th Merkel cabinet (2017-2021)		
CDU/CSU	76	13
SPD	116	40

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

4. FRANCE

4.1 Overview of results

The electoral manifestos of French presidents are kept quite short and therefore the number of pledges on immigration is fairly small. Perhaps as a consequence of this, they actually do not appear to have a hard time implementing measures that are in line with such pledges, fulfilling a very relevant share of them. Table 2 provides an overview of the results. When combining the three presidencies under analysis, we observe that French presidents have (at least partially) fulfilled about 71% of their pledges on immigration (that is, 15 out of 21). This rate varies among the different presidencies, with Nicolas Sarkozy being the most successful and Emmanuel Macron the least, as we will explore in greater detail below. Nevertheless, all three presidents managed to fulfill significantly more than half of their pledges, a result that casts serious doubts on the idea of a manifesto-policy gap in the French case.

Such doubts are further reinforced by the comparison of our results with journalistic and academic studies that have assessed overall levels of pledge fulfillment for the same presidencies. Table 3 shows how each president has performed, both on immigration (our own results) and in general (secondary sources). Overall results for Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency were retrieved from an academic study (Bouillaud et al. 2017), whereas those of the other two presidencies come from the pledge-tracking website

Lui Président, a resource created by a group of journalists which has been widely used by reputable media, such as *Le Monde*. On the whole, Table 3 shows that there are no discrepancies between immigration policy and the average of all policy areas combined. In fact, it is quite remarkable how percentages are broadly aligned. If anything, there is one French president (Nicolas Sarkozy) that stands out for performing better on immigration policy than in other areas. However, because we are dealing with very small numbers, we should be careful not to read too much into such comparisons.

Overall, our results on pledge fulfillment on migration, together with this rough comparison with external sources, allow us to conclude that French presidents perform surprisingly well in honoring their manifesto commitments on migration. Below we examine the track record of each individual President in greater detail.

4.2 Pledge fulfillment & immigration policy across time (2007-2022)

Pledge fulfillment under Sarkozy (2007-2012)

Immigration was a highly salient topic during Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency (Carvalho 2016). For many observers, Sarkozy epitomized a rightward shift in the policy and discourse of his party – the Union for a Popular Movement or UMP (*Union pour un Mouvement Populaire*) – and constitutes one of the clearest examples of how

Table 2: Pledge fulfillment on immigration, France (2007-2022)

	Total pledges	Total – fulfilled pledges			Not fulfilled pledges
		Partially fulfilled	Fully fulfilled	Total	
Total 2007 – 2022	21	3 (14%)	12 (57%)	15 (71%)	6 (29%)
Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) (UMP – Union pour un mouvement populaire)	5	0 (0%)	4 (80%)	4 (80%)	1 (20%)
François Hollande (2012-2017) (PS – Parti Socialiste)	4	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)
Emmanuel Macron (2017-2022) (En Marche!)	12	2 (17%)	6 (50%)	8 (67%)	4 (33%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

Table 3: Comparison of pledge fulfillment on immigration vs. overall pledge fulfillment, France (2007-2022)

	Total pledges immigration	Total pledges overall	Fulfillment rates immigration		Fulfillment rates overall	
			Fully fulfilled	At least partially fulfilled	Fully fulfilled	At least partially fulfilled
Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) (UMP – Union pour un mouvement populaire)	5	164	80%	80%	32%	50%
François Hollande (2012-2017) (PS – Parti Socialiste)	4	478	50%	75%	46%	73%
Emmanuel Macron (2017-2022) (En Marche!)	12	365	50%	67%	47%	66%

Source: Own elaboration based on (a) own data and (b) data retrieved from Bouillaud et al. 2017 and <https://www.luiresident.fr>.

the mainstream right reacts to the electoral success of the radical right by hardening its stance (Marthaler 2008). While this strategy intensified under Sarkozy, it was in fact not new. A clear precedent can be found in the early 1990s, when then Interior Minister Charles Pasqua spoke of a “zero immigration” goal and when the so-called *Pasqua Law* of 1993 visibly sought to curtail the rights of foreigners (Hollifield/Héran 2022). Sarkozy himself was no stranger to the immigration issue. This was already an important concern during his term as Minister of the Interior in the years before he took over the presidency in 2007. He had already championed various legal reforms on immigration, including two laws in 2003 and 2006 – known as the *Lois Sarkozy* –, both of which reflected a restrictionist agenda.³

However, rather than seeking to curb immigration *tout court*, the cornerstone of Sarkozy’s policy is best captured in his slogan advocating for “selective immigration” (*immigration choisie*) over unwanted or “imposed immigration” (*immigration subie*). By “*immigration subie*”, Sarkozy primarily meant family migrants – i.e., migrants using family reunification channels to settle in France –, but also asylum seekers. In contrast, *immigration choisie* reflected a utilitarian approach aimed at aligning immigration flows with France’s labor-market needs, prioritizing the entry of highly skilled and economically beneficial migrants.

While Sarkozy is best remembered for having failed to fundamentally stir migration flows in his desired direction, his presidency is also a good example of how the difficulty

³ Among other measures, Law 2003-1119 of 26 november 2003 – relative to the control of immigration, the stay of foreigners in France and nationality – stepped up control measures vis-à-vis irregular migrants and tightend restrictions on permanent residency permits, particularly for family members. Law 2006-911 of 24 July 2006 – relative to immigration and integration – was Sarkozy’s first attempt to instigate a model of “selected” / “chosen immigration” (*immigration choisie*): while creating new permits for high-skilled migrants and easing working rights for students, it also tightened the rules on family reunification and abolished a regularization mechanism for those who had resided in France for over ten years.

in achieving the desired policy outcomes (the efficacy gap) does not necessarily amount to a gap between intentions and policy output (the discursive gap). On the one hand, his policies had only a limited impact on the actual composition of migration – family reunification channels remained by far the most significant entry pathway to France and highly skilled migrants did not come in significant numbers. This has led observers to argue that Sarkozy's policy impact was more symbolic than substantive (Viprey 2010). On the other hand, the French executive did engage in legal and administrative reforms aimed at restricting family reunification, tightening asylum procedures, and attracting skilled workers. The discursive gap, if it exists, is therefore a lot less pronounced than the efficacy gap. This is unsurprising when considering that policies only have a limited capacity to affect migration flows and that there are other (more) relevant legal, social, economic, and political determinants of migration (Czaika/de Haas 2013).

That said, Sarkozy did take concrete policy steps aimed at delivering on his key electoral promises regarding migration. His presidential manifesto contained five identifiable pledges on the issue, four of which (i.e., 80%) were here considered fulfilled. These include: (1) reinforcing the policy of “selective immigration”; (2) tightening family reunification criteria; (3) introducing stricter language requirements for those wishing to settle in France; and (4) creating a separate Ministry of Integration and National Identity.

The first three goals were all enshrined in Law 2007-1631 of 20 November 2007 – relative to the control of immigration, integration and asylum –, one of the most significant legislative pieces on immigration during Sarkozy's presidency. Indeed, several of its provisions aimed to facilitate the entry or stay of skilled workers or those in sectors facing labor shortages. This included the establishment of a list of occupations exempt from labour market tests and the creation of a regularization mechanism for individuals with highly sought-after professional skills. This law also became known for making family reunification more restrictive in various respects: for example, it raised the minimum resource threshold for foreigner residents who wished to bring their family and required the parents of migrant children to sign a reception and integration contract for their family. Furthermore, in line with Sarkozy's pledge to “ask those who want to settle in France to make an effort to learn French beforehand”, the law also required family reunification applicants to pass a test in their country of origin evaluating their knowledge of French language and values (DEMIG 2015). Law 2007-1631 also illustrates how liberalizing changes often occur despite policymakers' intentions rather than because of them. This is visible in the fact that, in response to a condemnation by the European Court of Human Rights, the law increased the protections given to asylum-seekers in transit zones, establishing that

appeals against initial decisions have a “suspensive effect” (meaning the person cannot be removed before the full examination of the appeal).⁴

The policy of “selective immigration” of Nicolas Sarkozy would take a bizarre turn in 2011, when newly appointed Interior Minister Claude Guéant moved to impose limits on labor migration, allegedly in response to rising unemployment in France. The ill-famed *Circulaire Guéant* of May 2011 targeted non-European students in French universities in particular, restricting residence and employment rights for those seeking to change their status from student to employees. This reform caused an uproar in France, leading to strong opposition from student organizations, universities, businesses and others. Many saw it as a counterproductive economic policy, interpreting it instead as a political response to the increased strength of the Front National – who leveraged the economic crisis to accuse the government of opening the door to labour migration at a time of soaring unemployment and declining purchasing power (Hollifield/Héran 2022). In response, Socialist candidate François Hollande made the repeal of the *Circulaire Guéant* one of his key campaign promises, a pledge that was swiftly fulfilled when the new executive took office in May 2012.

Another key pledge of Nicolas Sarkozy was the creation of a separate ministry to supervise all immigration-related policies, what turned out to be the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and Co-Development, created in 2007. This was a highly controversial move as it explicitly connected immigration and national identity, with critics arguing that it stigmatized migrants as a threat to the nation (Marthaler 2008). This connection was further reinforced in 2009 when the government launched a “national debate” on national identity and on the elusive question of what it means to be French. As the debate quickly became sensitive and contentious, it was discontinued in 2010, at the same time that the aforementioned ministry was dissolved. In a remarkable U-turn, Sarkozy expressed regret over the creation of the ministry and acknowledged that the debate on national identity had sparked misunderstandings and tensions (Chrisafis 2018).

Finally, out of the five pledges on immigration in Sarkozy's presidential manifesto, only one remained unfulfilled: the introduction of quotas or “annual immigration ceilings”. This was another widely publicized and much debated pledge. Despite reiterating his intentions on multiple occasions, Sarkozy was well aware this proposal would face significant legal and political hurdles. His government tasked a special advisory body – the *Commission sur le cadre constitutionnel de la nouvelle politique d'immigration* – with assessing the feasibility of migrant quotas. Its conclusions

⁴ Nevertheless, asylum-seekers were only given 48 hours to lodge an appeal, an approach that was deemed restrictive by human rights groups. See: <https://www.statewatch.org/news/2012/july/statewatch-news-online-france-un-committee-against-torture-suspends-deportation-of-somali-woman/> (retrieved: 01/20/2025).

were unequivocal: such a policy would not be useful in controlling the flow of migrant workers, would be ineffective against illegal immigration, and would be legally unfeasible in cases of family reunification, as it risked violating fundamental rights.⁵ As a result, the plan was ultimately abandoned. However, it should be noted that the French government was prolific in establishing bilateral migration management agreements with multiple countries during this period, agreements that often included specific quotas (or a maximum number of visas) for professionals and artists to enter France.⁶ These agreements aligned well with France's "selective immigration" approach: while facilitating the legal migration of certain categories of workers, they established mechanisms for the expedited deportation of irregular migrants (while fostering co-development initiatives in exchange for cooperation).

In sum, Nicolas Sarkozy's record when it comes to pledge fulfillment on immigration is surprisingly positive, having fully fulfilled four out of five pledges. In this specific case, the manifesto-policy gap in immigration policy can therefore be refuted.

Pledge fulfillment under Hollande (2012-2017)

The presidency of the then leader of the Socialist party, François Hollande, was very different in tone from Sarkozy's tenure. Immigration was not nearly as central to Hollande's platform as it had been for Sarkozy, with the new incumbent taking a more cautious approach. This was after an election campaign in which immigration took center stage, with Sarkozy taking a hard line and the Front National of Marine Le Pen having its best result thus far. According to Hollifield and Héran's (2022) reading, Hollande had hopes to depoliticize the issue and appeared to follow the "grand bargain" strategy of the Mitterrand era, i.e., tightening control over new (irregular) flows while accelerating efforts to better integrate those already in France.

Hollande's electoral program included only four key commitments on immigration. The most ambitious – and likely for this reason, the one that was quietly abandoned – was the pledge to grant voting rights in local elections to foreigners (residing legally in France for at least five years). This had long been a promise of the French left, but efforts to implement it never materialized, in all likelihood due to the anticipated institutional and political hurdles. As such a reform would require a constitutional amendment, which needs a three-fifth majority in Congress, the left simply never had enough votes to pass it.

In contrast, the French government quickly acted on the promise to repeal the so-called *Circulaire Guéant*, as mentioned above. This was a key promise of the left,

who viewed the restrictions on foreign graduates' right to work as detrimental to France's economy and to the attractiveness of its higher education institutions.

The remaining two pledges on François Hollande's manifesto dealt with irregular migration, with Hollande trying to strike a delicate balance between appearing tough on migration control but pragmatic when it comes to the regularization possibilities for migrants already present in France. On the one hand, Hollande promised to establish objective criteria on the basis of which case-by-case regularizations can be made. This is what the so-called *Circulaire Valls* of 28 November 2012 did: clarifying and standardizing the conditions under which undocumented immigrants can be granted legal status. This measure was in large part a response to the perceived administrative arbitrariness in the processing of applications (Le Monde/AFP 2012). In practice, it contributed to an increase in the number of regularizations, which went from 23,000 in 2012 to 35,000 in 2013 (OECD 2015).

On the other hand, Hollande also sought to project a firm stance when writing in his manifesto that he "will lead a relentless fight against illegal immigration and clandestine labor networks". While it is difficult to judge what a "relentless fight" actually means – and what measures would be needed for this part of the pledge to be considered fulfilled –, we deem that there are sufficient objective grounds to consider this pledge at least *partially fulfilled*. This is largely because the French government took various initiatives against illegal work and clandestine immigrant networks facilitating the entry of irregular migrants.⁷ As such, various sources report an increase in the number of inspectors and random checks, an increase in sanctions against companies, and an increase in the number of clandestine networks dismantled (Supertino 2017).

The reason why we opted to consider this pledge only partially fulfilled is because of other significant legal changes that appear to contradict the spirit of a "relentless fight against illegal immigration". In specific, a law enacted on 31 December 2012 abolished the offence of irregular residence, decriminalizing general irregular stay (while criminalizing the more specific cases in which foreigners fail to comply with a removal order). Additionally, this law restricted the scope of the so-called "solidarity offense", introducing exemptions for those who provide humanitarian, legal, or medical assistance to irregular migrants without compensation (EMN 2013). While these changes were partly a means to ensure compliance with the European "Return Directive", they nonetheless marked a shift toward a less restrictive legal framework and, as such, appear at odds with Hollande's pledge.

5 Report available at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/rapport/29935-pour-une-politique-des-migrations-transparente-simple-et-solidaire> (retrieved: 01/20/2025).

6 At least fourteen such agreements were signed during Sarkozy's presidency, covering countries such as Brazil, Russia, Lebanon, Tunisia, Gabon, Congo, Benin, Cameroon, and Serbia, among others (DEMIG 2015).

7 For further details see: <https://www.luiresident.fr/francois-hollande/engagement/lutte-contre-limmigration-illegale-78/> (retrieved: 01/28/2025).

On balance, Hollande's record on immigration policy is relatively positive. Out of four pledges, only one is considered unfulfilled, one partially fulfilled, and two fully fulfilled. Comparing his policy record on immigration to the overall levels of pledge fulfillment calculated by the pledge-tracking website *Lui Président*, we find that there is virtually no difference between his record on immigration and his overall record (Table 3).

Pledge fulfillment under Macron (2017-2022)

Similarly to Hollande and in contrast to Sarkozy, immigration was not a central concern for Emmanuel Macron, who instead preferred to focus his campaign on themes like economic and budgetary modernization, political renovation, and European integration (Damgé/Sénécat 2017). Faced with a strong far right competitor, Macron sought to position himself as a moderate voice on immigration, as reflected in his somewhat awkward slogan "balancing humanity and firmness" (Le Monde 2017). Despite this, the perception that Macron gradually hardened his stance on migration throughout his mandate is widespread (e.g. Jarrassé 2019).

Even though Macron's electoral manifesto was short, it is nevertheless more detailed than the ones of his predecessors when it comes to immigration-related themes, judging by the higher number of pledges. This is likely a result of a changing context, as immigration was (even) more of a pressing topic after the 2015-2016 European migrant crisis and a series of deadly terrorist attacks in France over the same period, often perpetrated by French citizens of immigrant backgrounds.

As such, Emmanuel Macron's manifesto focused more on integration-related measures and on Islam in particular. In an attempt to navigate the delicate balance between protecting individual rights while upholding French secularism (*laïcité*) and fighting radicalism, Macron promised not to extend the veil ban to universities (unlike some right-wing opponents) while vowing to dismantle "associations which, under the guise of religion, attack the Republic". More specifically, he promised to close down places of worship inciting extremism. He also proposed to organize university training for religious leaders in "secularism, the Republic's values, and French language", while at the same time committing to enhancing religious education in schools so as to promote factual knowledge of different religions (a pledge that is controversial in France because it is perceived by many to be at odds with the *laïcité* principle).

Macron's record in this regard is mixed. On the one hand, the latter two pledges remained largely unfulfilled, as no corresponding measures were implemented as such. This is despite various efforts to link religious practices more closely with "respect for republican values".⁸ On the other hand, Macron did keep his word on the former two pledges. Specifically, the law on internal security and the fight against terrorism, enacted on 30 October 2017, provided for the closure of places of worship that incited or justified terrorism or promoted "hatred and discrimination".⁹ In early 2022, the French government reported on the closure of more than 700 so-called "separatist structures" (Donada 2022).

At the same time, Macron also expressed concerns about anti-discrimination policies. In specific, he promised to reactivate a positive discrimination scheme – the so-called *emplois francs* –, providing financial incentives to companies hiring residents from "priority districts". He also pledged to implement "large-scale random and unplanned control operations, in terms of access to employment or housing". His track record in this area is generally positive (even if anti-discrimination organizations reproach his government for not having gone far enough). The first scheme was indeed implemented, and there is also evidence that the government carried out a major campaign using audit testing (*opérations de testing*) to detect discrimination practices in hiring processes (Chaudière 2020).

As far as other integration-related measures are concerned, Macron also sought to make language proficiency more central for obtaining French nationality. He pledged to strengthen language training for naturalization candidates and to "make the mastery of the French language the main criterion for obtaining French nationality". Whereas the first pledge can be considered fully fulfilled – e.g., the government doubled the number of hours of French lessons offered to migrants –, the same cannot be said about the second. We opted to consider it only partially fulfilled since the adjustments in linguistic requirements for naturalization were relatively minor.¹⁰

When it comes to asylum, Macron pledged to "examine asylum applications in less than six months, including appeals" and deport rejected applicants "without delay to their country of origin". These pledges illustrate well the dilemma researchers face in assessing pledge fulfillment based on *policy outputs* versus *policy outcomes*. On the one hand, the French government implemented significant measures meant to reduce delays in the processing of asylum applications and expedite deportations for those

8 For example, in response to Macron's request, the French Council of Muslim Worship developed a "charter of republican values" (de Boissieu/Le Priol 2021). Additionally, the so-called "anti-separatism" law of 2021 required associations receiving public funding to sign a contract committing to republican principles (Tidey 2021). While the government did try to establish a unified institution to certify imams, internal divisions within Muslim organizations proved to be an obstacle (Le Monde/AFP 2021).

9 LOI n° 2017-1510 du 30 octobre 2017 renforçant la sécurité intérieure et la lutte contre le terrorisme, available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/LEGIARTI000035933799/2017-11-01/> (retrieved: 01/20/2025).

10 Decree n° 2019-1597 of 30 December 2019 reinforced the previously existing B1 language requirement, which was now also requested in written form, not just oral. It also extended this requirement to previously excluded groups. Available at: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000039696962> (retrieved: 01/20/2025).

denied asylum. These were among the main goals of the controversial *Loi Collomb* (Law No. 2018-778 of 10 September 2018 for controlled migration, an effective right to asylum and successful integration). On the other hand, these measures fell short of achieving Macron's stated goals. As Macron's manifesto articulates these pledges in terms of outcomes (with no reference to specific policy measures), they cannot be considered fully fulfilled. We opted to classify the first as partially fulfilled, as processing times had substantially decreased by 2022, even if not fully meeting the six-month target.¹¹ However, the second was deemed unfulfilled, given the very substantial gap between Macron's objectives and deportation statistics. Despite being the EU country issuing the highest number of orders to leave, France continues to struggle with very low enforcement rates (Eurostat 2024b). Data from 2022 show that only 6.4% of such orders resulted in repatriation (Geoffroy/Deroeux 2024). Macron's failure to meet his goals on deportations contrasts with the success of his pledge to "work with European partners to create a force of 50,000 European border guards", given the EU's concurrent efforts to strengthen Frontex (Council of the EU 2019).

Finally, while Macron's manifesto was largely silent on labor migration, it did mention "accelerated reception formalities" for foreign specialists working in environmental transition research. While it is unclear what Macron meant exactly – as researchers already benefit from simplified procedures under schemes like the *Passeport Talent* –, there is no evidence that he introduced any special procedure specifically for environmental transition specialists. As a result, we consider this promise unfulfilled.

Overall, Macron's record in terms of pledge fulfillment can be considered quite positive, as he kept 67% of his pledges (8 out of 12 were at least partially fulfilled). This is remarkably similar to the overall score attributed by the pledge-tracking website *Lui Président*, suggesting that Macron's record on immigration policy is no different from his overall record.

4.3 Pledge fulfillment across restrictiveness and policy area

Having established that there is no manifesto-policy gap when it comes to immigration-related pledges, it is also relevant to examine how these pledges vary in terms of restrictiveness and how *liberal pledges* compare to *restrictionist pledges* in terms of fulfillment. The common perception that policymakers struggle to translate *tough talk* into *tough action* could lead us to expect that implementing liberal policies would be easier than enforcing restrictionist ones.

However, this expectation is not confirmed in the French case. French presidents have largely upheld their more

restrictive pledges: eight out of nine were at least partially fulfilled (Table 4). This fulfillment rate is actually higher than that of less restrictive pledges, where only three out of five were at least partially fulfilled. Naturally, given the small number of pledges, these results should be interpreted with caution (had just one more less restrictive pledge been implemented, the difference would be negligible). Nevertheless, they suggest that if a gap between tough talk and weak action exists in France, it is *not* due to politicians failing to follow through on restrictionist pledges or finding it easier to implement liberal ones.

Table 4 also confirms the previously outlined view that Sarkozy adopted a tougher stance than his successors: while both Hollande and Macron made a mix of restrictionist and liberal pledges, Sarkozy's pledges were exclusively restrictionist. In contrast, and in line with what could be expected from a president coming from the left, Hollande was the one with the least restrictionist program. Even though he failed to keep his most liberal policy of all (on voting rights for foreigners), the repeal of the *Circulaire Guéant* and a seemingly neutral pledge like streamlining regularization procedures (coded as N/A) resulted in less restrictive outcomes in practice.

Does pledge restrictiveness vary depending on the specific immigration policy area? Interestingly, the cross-tabulation of pledge restrictiveness and policy area shows that French presidents are not similarly tough across the two policy areas we subsumed under immigration policy (entry/exit policy and integration policy) (Table 5). The bulk of more restrictive pledges is made in the field of entry/exit policy, whereas the picture is more balanced for integration policy. In other words, French presidents are tougher on policies dealing with access to the territory, and comparatively more liberal on policies dealing with the integration of migrants – a finding which is largely unsurprising, as intentions to better integrate migrants contrast with the often tough rhetoric on border control and irregular migration.

Finally, we also set to investigate whether there is a discernible difference in pledge fulfillment rates across the two different policy domains. As mentioned before, there are good reasons to expect policymakers to face fewer constraints in the field of integration policy (more subject to domestic politics and less to international and judicial constraints) and therefore to perform better in this domain. Once again, the French case defies expectations. The fulfillment rate for pledges dealing with entry/exit policies (72%) is actually slightly superior to the fulfillment rate for integration measures (67%) (Table 5). The expectation that fulfillment rates are higher for integration-related pledges can therefore be disconfirmed.

¹¹ The average length of the asylum procedure at first instance decreased substantially in 2022, from 258 days in 2021 to 158 days in 2022 (that is, under six months). However, when factoring in the average processing times of appeals (included in Macron's pledge), the six-month target remains unachievable. See: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/france/asylum-procedure/procedures/regular-procedure/> (retrieved: 01/20/ 2025).

Table 4: Pledge restrictiveness and pledge fulfillment

	Total pledges	Restrictiveness		
		More restrictive	Less restrictive	N/A
Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) (UMP – Union pour un mouvement populaire)	5	4	0	1
François Hollande (2012-2017) (PS – Parti Socialiste)	4	1	2	1
Emmanuel Macron (2017-2022) (En Marche!)	12	4	3	5
Total				
2007-2022	21	9	5	7
Total - fulfillment				
Fulfilled		8 (89%)	3 (60%)	5 (71%)
Unfulfilled		1 (11%)	2 (40%)	2 (29%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

Table 5: Pledge restrictiveness and pledge fulfillment across policy areas

Policy area	Pledge restrictiveness			Total	Pledge fulfillment	
	More restrictive	Less restrictive	N/A		Fulfilled	Unfulfilled
Entry/Exit Policy	7	2	2	11	8 (72%)	3 (27%)
Integration Policy	2	3	4	9	6 (67%)	3 (33%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

4.4 Concluding summary

This chapter has examined the extent to which French presidents from 2007 to 2022 fulfilled their manifesto pledges on immigration policy. Contrary to common perceptions of a gap between promises and actions, our findings indicate that French presidents have, in fact, implemented the majority of their immigration-related pledges, with an overall fulfillment rate of approximately 71%. While there are variations across different presidencies, with Nicolas Sarkozy achieving the highest fulfillment rate and Emmanuel Macron the lowest, all three leaders managed to implement more than half of their stated commitments.

The analysis also challenges assumptions about the relative difficulty of enforcing restrictive policies, particularly as far as entry/exit policy is concerned. While restrictionist pledges could be harder to implement due to legal or international constraints, our findings suggest that French presidents have nevertheless managed to take relevant steps to fulfill a relevant share of their more restrictive pledges. Moreover, the expected divide in pledge fulfillment between entry/exit policies and integration

measures does not hold in the French case, as fulfillment rates are comparable across these two domains.

Ultimately, the French case challenges some prevailing assumptions, showing that immigration policy is *not* an area where manifesto commitments are particularly susceptible to non-fulfillment, and suggesting that French presidents do appear to retain a considerable degree of agency over the course of immigration policy.

5. GERMANY

5.1 Overview of results

Our data on the overall level of fulfillment of election pledges in Germany shows that governing parties have at least partially fulfilled 74 out of 128 election pledges on immigration, corresponding to a success rate of about 58%. In contrast, 44 pledges (34%) were considered unfulfilled, whereas ten (8%) could not be determined (Table 6). Similarly to France, the fact that the majority of electoral pledges have been fulfilled casts some doubt on the notion of a discourse-policy gap in migration policy, at least as far as the manifesto-policy link is concerned. This is particularly

the case when considering the comparatively more challenging institutional context of coalition governments in Germany, where policymaking requires negotiation, compromise, and trade-offs that can dilute, alter, or simply do away with individual parties' original pledges.

Table 6 also shows that there is significant variation in fulfillment rates across legislative periods and between parties. The third Merkel cabinet (2013-2017) was by far the most successful overall, whereas the fourth Merkel (2017-2021) cabinet had the lowest fulfillment rate, though with similar results to the first cabinet (2005-2009). The absolute number of pledges varies significantly across these periods, though (15 in 2005, in contrast to 53 in 2017). This should be considered when interpreting the 2017-2021 government as the worst performer, since the very high number of pledges suggests a more demanding policy agenda. In the next section of this chapter we explore in greater detail the performance of each cabinet and the parties that were part of them.

When comparing our results with studies assessing overall performance rates for German cabinets, we find no conclusive evidence that German parties find it more difficult to deliver on migration-related promises than in other policy areas. While in some cases parties perform better overall than on immigration policy, in others they do not (Table 7). However, it is important to note that our data in this regard is limited and that our assessment remains preliminary. This is partially due to the fact that we could only find comparable data for two out of four cabinets, and partially because our pledge identification criteria is not identical to Ferguson (2019), who has a more narrow understanding of what constitutes a pledge.

With those caveats in mind, Table 6 suggests a mixed picture. Even when excluding those cases with a very small number of pledges on immigration (the FDP in 2009 and the SPD in 2005), results for the CDU/CSU show that while in 2005 there is a significant discrepancy between the fulfillment rate on immigration (50%) and the overall fulfillment rate (69%), the same does not hold for the next legislative period, where the party performed similarly well in both respects.

5.2 Pledge fulfillment & immigration policy across time (2005-2021)

Merkel's first cabinet (2005-2009)

Out of the four legislative periods under analysis, 2005 stands out as the year in which German governing parties focused the least on immigration, with only 15 pledges in total (Table 6). This is especially true for the SPD, which made just five pledges, all of them focused exclusively on integration policy. It is also one of the periods with the lowest fulfillment rates, as both parties combined achieved a success rate of only 53%. Interestingly, this example shows that the number of pledges is not

necessarily linked to fulfillment rates – that is, that a lower number of pledges does not necessarily make fulfillment more likely –, as we had hypothesized for the French case.

While the SPD 2005 manifesto focused only on the party's commitment to improve integration opportunities for specific groups, in particular migrant children and women, the CDU/CSU – who was operating from the opposition bench in the 2005 election campaign – identified other pressing areas for reform, focusing also on labor migration, family reunification, internal security and immigration control, and adopting a clearly more restrictionist tone.

To give some examples, the CDU/CSU manifesto spoke of “limiting immigration into the labor market to occupations in shortage and to foreigners who can contribute to top achievements in science, research, business and culture”. While we find the use of the expression “limiting” somewhat deceiving, there were nonetheless policy steps meant to ease the migration of high-skilled workers during this legislative period. Similarly to what was happening in France, efforts to attract high-skilled migrants were combined with restrictions on family reunification. Like Sarkozy, the CDU/CSU followed on its pledge to ask migrant spouses to prove their German language skills prior to entering Germany. The CDU/CSU also linked migration to security, committing to introduce stricter security measures to protect against foreigners suspected of terrorism, introduce a visa warning file, transfer visa issuance competencies to the Ministry of Interior, and consistently deport foreign criminals. Its record is limited in this regard, as only the first measure was considered fulfilled, with the enactment of the Anti-Terror Database Act (*Antiterrordateigesetz*).

Interestingly, while both the SPD and the CDU had pledged to make coercion into forced marriage a separate criminal offense, this was ultimately unfulfilled (perhaps because of the legal redundancy concerns raised by some legal experts). This pledge was nevertheless implemented in 2011, during the subsequent legislative term.

In line with the SPD's emphasis on integration, the first Merkel government gave priority to this topic, developing Germany's first comprehensive integration strategy – the National Integration Plan of 2007. This plan marked a shift towards a coordinated national effort, involving different levels of government and various non-state actors. Furthermore, and in line with pledges coming from the CDU/CSU manifesto, this government made integration courses mandatory for certain groups and introduced sanctions in case of refusal to participate (Deutsche Welle 2007).

Merkel's second cabinet (2009-2013)

In 2009, the CDU/CSU and the liberal FDP formed a coalition government. With a total of 22 pledges on immigration, these parties achieved a combined fulfillment rate of 59%,

Table 6: Pledge fulfillment on immigration, Germany (2005-2021)

	Total pledges	Total – fulfilled pledges			Total – Not fulfilled pledges	Undetermined
		Partially fulfilled	Fully fulfilled	Total		
Total 2005-2021	128	9 (7%)	65 (51%)	74 (58%)	44 (34%)	10 (8%)
1st Merkel cabinet (2005-2009)						
CDU/CSU	10	1 (10%)	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0 (0%)
SPD	5	0 (0%)	3 (60%)	3 (60%)	1 (20%)	1 (20%)
2nd Merkel cabinet (2009-2013)						
CDU/CSU	18	2 (11%)	10 (56%)	12 (67%)	4 (22%)	2 (11%)
FDP	4	1 (25%)	0 (0%)	1 (25%)	2 (50%)	1 (25%)
3rd Merkel cabinet (2013-2017)						
CDU/CSU	15	0 (0%)	12 (80%)	12 (80%)	2 (13%)	1 (7%)
SPD	23	0 (0%)	14 (61%)	14 (61%)	7 (30%)	2 (9%)
4th Merkel cabinet (2017-2021)						
CDU/CSU	13	1 (8%)	6 (46%)	7 (54%)	6 (46%)	0 (0%)
SPD	40	4 (10%)	16 (40%)	20 (50%)	17 (43%)	3 (8%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

Table 7: Comparison of pledge fulfillment on immigration vs. overall pledge fulfillment, Germany (2005-2013)

	Total pledges		Fulfillment rates immigration*		Fulfillment rates – overall	
	Immigration	Overall	Fully fulfilled	At least partially fulfilled	Fully fulfilled	At least partially fulfilled
Merkel I (2005-2009)						
CDU/CSU	10	118	40%	50%	46%	69%
SPD	4	116	80%	80%	39%	66%
Merkel II (2009-2013)						
CDU/CSU	16	116	63%	75%	65%	78%
FDP	3	112	0%	33%	33%	51%

Source: Own elaboration based on (a) own data and (b) data retrieved from Ferguson (2019).

*The data presented here differs from that in Table 6 because pledges classified as ‘undetermined’ in Table 6 were excluded from the overall results here. This adjustment was made to align with Ferguson’s dataset, which does not include ‘undetermined’ pledges either. In other words, only pledges for which fulfillment could be clearly determined were included.

in line with the general average for German cabinets. This result masks a significant inter-party difference, though. While the CDU/CSU alone can be credited with (at least partially) fulfilling about 67% of its pledges, its junior partner did not see policy results matching more than one of its (only) four pledges.

What is noteworthy about the CDU/CSU’s electoral program in 2009 is its shift in focus toward integration policy. Among others, the party committed to the expansion of language/integration courses and focused on measures to support numerous target groups, including migrant children, migrant woman, skilled migrants, and migrant businesses. Its track record in

this regard is generally positive. The expansion of all-day schooling, the increase in the labor force participation of migrant women, and a new law to improve the recognition of foreign professional qualifications (2012 Federal Recognition Act), were some of the measures or outcomes that matched the CDU/CSU’s commitments. The pledge to support integration courses partially overlapped with the FDP’s pledge to better adapt integration courses to target groups – the only FDP pledge in which we could find some modest evidence of fulfillment.

The CDU/CSU’s relatively high pledge fulfillment rate can in part be attributed to the inclusion of multiple *status quo pledges* – commitments to maintaining existing

policies. This includes: no right to vote for foreigners in local elections, no softening of language requirements for naturalization, and rejection of dual citizenship for non-EU nationals. This was in direct opposition to the FDP, who wrote in its manifesto that it supported the right to vote in local elections for all migrants who had been legally resident in Germany for at least five years.

In terms of entry/exit policy, the CDU/CSU's record is more mixed: while its pledge to set up a central visa warning file (to combat visa abuse) was fulfilled, its aspiration to simplify deportation law and expand deportation grounds remained unfulfilled. Additionally, its commitment to maintain national sovereignty over immigration and, more concretely, reject EU efforts to standardize asylum law also appear at odds with the fact that we did not find evidence of actual opposition to various EU directives on this (e.g., Qualification Directive 2011/95/EU or Asylum Procedures Directive 2013/32/EU).

As mentioned, the FDP stayed relatively silent on migration and seemed unable to develop a profile of its own in this regard. Other than the pledges already mentioned, the party focused on an economically oriented approach to immigration policy, tailored to the needs of the German labor market. Its pledge to introduce a "points system" never materialized.

Merkel's third cabinet (2013-2017)

The trend of increased interest in migration policy continued in the 2013 federal election, judging by the expansion of the total number of election pledges identified (n=38). This was, by far, the most successful legislature in terms of pledge fulfillment, as we estimate that about 68% of those pledges were fulfilled.

The CDU was particularly successful, as the vast majority of its pledges can be considered fulfilled (twelve out of fifteen, that is, 80%). Its program was relatively similar to the one from 2009, placing an emphasis on integration measures (related to language, education, training, and labor market integration), while also focusing on border control and security. This time it did manage to tighten deportation law for foreign criminals. It also followed through on pledges to establish random checks along the border and to campaign for an EU-wide entry and exit register. Unlike previous years, however, its 2013 manifesto paid some attention to asylum policy: reiterating its commitment to the fundamental right of asylum, it also defended the need for speedy procedures at immigration authorities and administrative courts. As this became a particularly pressing matter throughout this legislature, multiple measures were taken in the field of asylum, including the *Act on the Acceleration of Asylum Procedures*, enacted in October 2015.

The SPD program was more extensive than that of the CDU/CSU, with a total of 23 pledges. Its success rate was also considerable, though more modest than

that of its senior coalition partner, with an estimated 14 pledges (61%) fulfilled. With a manifesto heavily focused on integration-related measures, it addressed a variety of different issues, including tailored language support for disadvantaged children, greater public sector inclusion of migrants, and speedier recognition of foreign qualifications. It placed particular emphasis on the local level, pledging to strengthen integration and social cohesion by providing targeted support for neighborhoods with special reception and integration services, enhancing local participation through migrant organizations, and launching federal programs to assist cities affected by poverty-related immigration.

It also paid more attention to asylum seekers than before, aiming to abolish restrictive residence obligations, reform asylum benefits, facilitate access to the labor market, and grant them access to integration courses (alongside "tolerated persons"). The SPD's record in this regard is largely positive, as various legal reforms ultimately met these objectives in some form.

The SPD and CDU programs were most at odds on their diametrically opposed commitments to voting rights and dual citizenship. While the CDU benefited from the status quo, the SPD was nonetheless successful in achieving its goal of effectively allowing dual citizenship for children born and raised in Germany. An important reform of citizenship law in November 2014 allowed children of foreign parents to retain both their parents' citizenship and German citizenship, eliminating the *Optionspflicht* requirement, i.e. the obligation to choose one upon reaching adulthood (Winter et al. 2015).

In addition to this, the SPD can also take pride on another important legal reform that met one of its pledges: amendments to the Residence Act on 1 August 2015 made it easier for well-integrated young people whose deportation had been suspended to remain in Germany (Grote/Vollmer 2016).

Merkel's fourth cabinet (2017-2021)

The increasing salience of immigration issues in Germany post-2015 is naturally reflected in parties' manifestos, both from a quantitative and qualitative point of view. Quantitatively, the high number of identified pledges is unprecedented (n= 53). Qualitatively, there is a relative shift from an emphasis on integration policy to a greater focus on topics related to entry/exit policy. However, it is remarkable that such shifts are primarily driven by the SPD, particularly when it comes to the total number of pledges (n= 40). Overall, this is the worst performing cabinet in terms of pledge fulfillment, with a combined rate of success of 51%.

Despite its much lower share of pledges (vis-à-vis the SPD), the CDU/CSU's fulfillment rate also decreases compared to previous terms, standing at 54%. With only thirteen pledges, the CDU/CSU manifesto pays particular attention to migration control and security, with pledges

to step up efforts to deport rejected asylum applicants as well as radical Islamists, combat the activities of smugglers, expand the list of safe countries of origin, and conclude similar agreements to the EU-Turkey agreement with African countries. Its track record in this regard is, at best, mixed: the latter two pledges, for example, did not materialize. The same is true for pledges in the field of integration. Most notably, the intention to implement “binding integration agreements” did not see the light of day, whereas more modest pledges (such as “regular integrating monitoring”) can be considered fulfilled.

Other than this, the CDU/CSU program also addressed briefly labor migration policy, focused on skilled workers in specific and on meeting German’s economic needs. More precisely, it spoke of a new regulation – a “Skilled Immigration Act” – meant to simplify the admission of skilled workers. This was roughly in line with the SPD’s pledge to “create an immigration law that will enable us to better manage the influx of qualified workers”. Even though the CDU/CSU framed this policy in a more restrictive way than the SPD, the parties found some common ground when enacting what can be considered one of the major reform projects of the Grand Coalition government in this legislative period: the Germany’s Skilled Immigration Act (*Fachkräfteeinwanderungsgesetz*) of 15 August 2019.

As mentioned, the SPD manifesto of 2017 stands out in several regards. On the one hand, its section on migration is significantly more extensive than in previous years. On the other hand, whereas in the past the party was mostly focused on integration policy, the 2017 manifesto radically shifts the emphasis from integration towards measures related to entry/exit policy, when before this dimension had been at best secondary. To be sure, integration policy continues to be important to the party. However, entry/exit measures are, for the first time, more numerous.

In response to the so-called “refugee crisis”, the party tries to strike a balance between the defense of an “orderly” but “humanitarian” migration policy. In practice, however, the vast majority of its pledges are not restrictionist in tone, and continue to reflect an overall liberal stance. Some exceptions to this are calls to strengthen the mandate of Frontex and to return rejected refugees more consistently to their countries of origin. At the same time the party advocates for a “European sea rescue program” and focuses in particular on expanding support programs for voluntary departure, while staying silent on measures to enforce involuntary returns. In addition, it also places an emphasis on EU-wide solidarity mechanisms, combating the causes of flight (e.g. via development aid and disarmament initiatives), taking in refugees in a “controlled manner” via the UNHCR, achieving better and faster asylum decisions, improving the recognition of gender-specific grounds for asylum, among others.

The SPD’s overall record on entry and exit policies is mixed, with only half of its commitments fulfilled in some form.

While most pledges reflect good intentions, government actions have sometimes directly contradicted these commitments. Two instances stand out in particular. First, despite the SPD’s explicit commitment not to deport individuals “into a lack of prospects and dangers to their lives,” specifically mentioning Afghanistan, the German government continued deportations to the country during this period. Second, while the SPD pledged *not* to extend the temporary suspension of family reunification for refugees with subsidiary protection status – a measure initially set for two years – it ultimately compromised with the CDU/CSU, supporting an extension beyond the original deadline and agreeing to impose a numerical cap afterwards.

These contradictions stand in contrast to areas where the SPD was relatively more successful. Examples include the implementation of the Skilled Labor Immigration Act and the introduction of the *Beschäftigungsduldung*, a new type of tolerated stay permit for well-integrated individuals who had worked in Germany for at least 18 months (and met other criteria). While these reforms did not fully align with the SPD’s original vision, they nonetheless partially advanced some broader policy goals.

Finally, while in government the SPD was also able to build on several of its integration-related pledges, many of them aimed at improving the representation of migrants in German society, especially in education and the labor market. This includes, for example, commitments to increase the proportion of vocational trainers and public sector employees with a family history of immigration or to improve the recognition of foreign qualifications and enhance assistance with the cost of recognition procedures.

5.3 Pledge fulfillment across restrictiveness and policy area

In a further step, we ask how the coded election pledges vary in terms of restrictiveness. What immediately stands out as striking is the predominance of liberalizing pledges: out of 128 pledges, almost half (n=60) were coded as “less restrictive”, whereas only one-quarter (n=30) were coded as “more restrictive” (the remaining ones could not be clearly assigned) (Table 8). This is a first rough indication that parties have actually tried to move the legal framework in a more liberal direction overall. Nevertheless, Germany also stands out for remarkable inter-party differences: whereas the CDU/CSU is much more focused on more restrictive policies, the complete opposite is true for the SPD. Adding all of its pledges throughout the years, the CDU has a total of 25 pledges pushing for more restrictive measures, and only 12 for less restrictive ones. The difference is even more remarkable in the case of the SPD, who counts a total of 45 less restrictive pledges and only five more restrictive ones. Consequently, it is in fact only the German Social Democrats who are committed to liberalizing migration and integration policy.

There are some interesting differences across time, nevertheless, particularly as far as the CDU/CSU is concerned. While in 2005 its program was largely restrictionist, the distribution of more and less restrictive pledges became more balanced in 2009 and 2013, with the party going back to a more restrictionist profile in 2017. The SPD largely maintains a liberal profile over time, but it is nonetheless interesting that 2017 marks the first time where the SPD has more than one restrictionist pledge (Table 8).

Besides party differences, there is an additional important distinction to be made when understanding the predominance of liberal pledges: the specific policy area they refer to or, to put it more explicitly, the fact that the vast majority of liberal pledges (77%) are made in the field of integration. Indeed, when breaking down pledge restrictiveness per policy area (Table 9), it is striking how much policy restrictiveness varies across the two broad policy areas we subsumed under immigration policy (integration policy and entry/exit policy). Whereas the vast majority of less restrictive pledges are in the field of integration, the opposite is true for more restrictive pledges: 67% of restrictionist pledges are made in the field of entry/exit policy. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of efforts to liberalize integration policy in specific than immigration policy in general.

This is not so surprising when considering the emphasis that German parties place on better integrating migrants via measures that are coded as “less restrictive” as they aim to expand opportunities available to them (in the labor

market, education, integration and language courses, etc.). Indeed, Table 9 also reveals that, overall, parties pay comparatively more attention to integration policy than to entry/exit policy: 58% of all pledges (n=74) refer to integration-related measures while 42% (n=53) deal with entry/exit policy. In this regard, there are no significant inter-party differences: although there is notable variation over time, both the CDU/CSU and the SPD have more pledges on integration than on exit/entry policy.¹²

Finally, it is also relevant to explore how different categories of pledges compare in terms of fulfillment. Do parties have an easier time implementing less restrictive pledges vis-à-vis more restrictive ones? And are pledges in the field of integration policy more easily implemented than pledges in the field of entry/exit policy? To simplify the analysis, we proceed in separate steps (Table 10).

On the one hand, when focusing on pledge restrictiveness only, results appear to suggest that German parties have a slightly easier time implementing liberal policies (vis-à-vis restrictionist ones) or, to put it differently, are more consequent in translating *liberal talk* into *liberal action* than in translating *tough talk* into *tough action*. This is because the rate of implementation of less restrictive pledges is superior in seven percentage points to the rate of implementation of more restrictive pledges. Among ‘less restrictive’ pledges (n=60), a total of 57% (n=34) were considered fulfilled whereas among ‘more restrictive’ pledges (n=30), the rate of implementation stands at 50% (n=15). However, we should be careful not interpret too much into such small

Table 8: Pledge restrictiveness in Germany, 2005-2021

	Total pledges	Restrictiveness		
		More restrictive	Less restrictive	N/A
Total 2005-2021	128 (100%)	30 (23%)	60 (47%)	38 (30%)
Per party in coalition governments (N)				
Merkel I (2005-2009)				
CDU/CSU	10	8	0	2
SPD	5	1	3	1
Merkel II (2009-2013)				
CDU/CSU	18	5	5	8
FDP	4	0	3	1
Merkel III (2013-2017)				
CDU/CSU	15	4	5	6
SPD	23	0	21	2
Merkel IV (2017-2021)				
CDU/CSU	13	8	2	3
SPD	40	4	21	15

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

12 In total, the CDU/CSU has 33 pledges dealing with integration and 23 pledges dealing with entry/exit policy. As explored before, the emphasis on integration was more pronounced in the programs of 2009 and 2013. The SPD has a total of 39 pledges on integration and 29 on entry/exit policy. Strikingly, 24 of those were made in the 2017 manifesto.

Table 9: Pledge restrictiveness per policy area

	More restrictive	Less restrictive	N/A	Total
Entry/Exit Policy	20 (67%)	14 (23%)	19 (51%)	53 (42%)
Integration Policy	10 (33%)	46 (77%)	18 (49%)	74 (58%)
Total	30 (100%)	60 (100%)	37 (100%)	127 (100%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

differences. Had two more more restrictive pledges been implemented, the results would be identical.

On the other hand, when examining fulfillment across different policy areas, we observe no significant differences. The fulfillment rate for entry/exit policies (58%) is virtually identical to that of integration policies (57%) (Table 10). The assumption that parties might have an easier time stirring integration policy in their desired direction does not seem to hold.

The cross-tabulation of policy area and policy restrictiveness in the right end of Table 10 allows us to refine these findings. While it could be expected that governments would struggle more with fulfilling restrictionist pledges in the field of entry/exit policy (given potential legal, institutional, and international constraints), the data does not support this assumption. The fulfillment rate for restrictionist pledges in entry/exit policy stands at 60% (with 12 out of 20 such pledges implemented). This rate is identical to that of the more numerous liberal pledges in integration policy, where 27 out of 46 commitments were at least partially fulfilled. Instead, it is in the numerical much less common combinations of “entry/exit x less restrictive” and, in particular, “integration x more restrictive” that parties perform the worst. The most relevant implication of this is that the abovementioned difference in fulfillment between liberal and restrictionist pledges actually only applies in

the field of integration. In other words, it is not the case that parties are more consequent in translating *liberal talk* into *liberal action* in general, but only when it comes to integration. On entry/exit policy, there appears to be no gap between *tough talk* and *weak action*.

5.4 Concluding summary

The analysis of pledge fulfillment in immigration policy in Germany suggests that governing parties have been moderately successful in honoring their electoral commitments. This is despite the complexities of coalition governance, which often forces parties to revise and compromise on some of their initial electoral commitments. While some variation exists across parties and legislative periods, it is nevertheless remarkable that parties consistently fulfill more than half of their promises. With an overall fulfillment rate of 58% across the four legislative periods under analysis, there is little evidence to suggest a systematic democratic deficit in migration policymaking, at least as far as the manifesto-policy link is concerned. This is particularly the case for the CDU/CSU, which has at least partially kept about 64% of its promises on migration (compared to 54% for the SPD). That the CDU/CSU performs better is unsurprising given that it has always been the senior coalition partner, and therefore in a stronger bargaining position.

Table 10: Pledge fulfillment per (1) restrictiveness, (2) policy area and (3) the interaction between policy area and restrictiveness

	Pledge restrictiveness			Policy area		Policy Area x Restrictiveness			
	More restrictive	Less restrictive	N/A	Entry/Exit	Integra-tion	Entry/Exit		Integration	
						x More restrictive	x Less restrictive	x More restrictive	x Less restrictive
Fulfilled	15 (50%)	34 (57%)	25 (66%)	31 (58%)	42 (57%)	12 (60%)	7 (50%)	3 (30%)	27 (59%)
Unful-filled	14 (47%)	21 (35%)	9 (24%)	20 (38%)	23 (31%)	7 (35%)	6 (43%)	7 (70%)	15 (33%)
Undeter-mined	1 (3%)	5 (8%)	4 (11%)	2 (4%)	8 (11%)	1 (5%)	1 (7%)	0 (0%)	4 (9%)
Total	30 (100%)	60 (100%)	37 (100%)	53 (100%)	74 (100%)	20 (100%)	14 (100%)	10 (100%)	46 (100%)

Source: Own elaboration based on own data.

When it comes to the content of pledges, our findings also do not support the expectation that pledges in the field of entry/exit policy will be harder to fulfill than integration-related pledges, as the fulfillment rate across both policy areas is identical. The picture is less clear when comparing the performance of liberal pledges versus restrictionist pledges. While liberal pledges seem to get implemented more often, differences are not substantial and are largely driven by integration policy in specific. In other words, if there is a liberal bias in migration policy in Germany, it is largely attributable to efforts to improve migrant integration, and not to a liberal trend in entry/exit policy.

6. CONCLUSION

Building on the concept of a discourse-policy gap in migration policy, we set out to investigate whether the commitments made by governing elites at election time translate into concrete policy action or whether migration stands out as a policy area with a particularly salient democratic deficit. Taking France and Germany as case studies and covering a period of about fifteen years in each, we conducted a comprehensive analysis of the election pledges made by ruling elites in both countries, evaluating their degree of fulfillment.

Contrary to prevailing assumptions about democratic deficits in migration policy – attributed in part to a limited fulfillment of the electoral mandate by governing parties (Lutz 2021) –, our findings suggest that executives in France and Germany do implement a significant portion of their immigration-related commitments. The overall fulfillment rates – approximately 71% in France and 58% in Germany – challenge the notion of a systematic failure by governments to uphold their electoral promises in this domain and suggest that governing elites do retain some degree of agency over migration policy.

Furthermore, our data also questions two other prevailing assumptions. The first is that the manifesto-policy gap should be less pronounced in integration policy (*vis-à-*

vis policies dealing with admission to the territory) given that integration policy is less subjected to legal and international constraints and more a matter of domestic politics. None of our two cases exhibits a substantial difference in pledge fulfillment rates across the two policy domains (integration policy vs. entry/exit policy), indicating that parties also manage to uphold a majority of their pledges on admission policy. This may be because parties calibrate their promises to align with existing constraints, tailoring the majority of their commitments to what is realistically attainable.

The second is that the purported gap between *tough talk* and *weak action* cannot be conclusively attributed to the fact that policymakers may find it easier to implement their more liberal (less restrictive) promises *vis-à-vis* their more restrictive ones. This is particularly obvious in the French case, where the share of restrictionist pledges is higher to begin with and where parties actually fulfill them at a higher rate than their liberal pledges. The picture is more nuanced for the German case, where liberal pledges (in the field of integration in particular) are more dominant in absolute terms and where these seem to be enacted at a slightly higher rate than restrictionist pledges. However, one cannot speak of “*tough talk, weak action*” in this case either, since *tough talk* is mostly reserved for entry/exit policies, an area where German parties perform well. It is only in the field of integration that they fail to convert *tough talk* into action, but the number of restrictionist pledges on integration is very small to begin with and thus of little practical relevance.

Ultimately, our results call for a reassessment of the assumption that immigration is a policy domain where electoral pledges are particularly difficult to translate into action. Future research should expand this analysis to additional national contexts, explore alternative sources of pledges beyond manifestos, and investigate the conditions under which migration policy pledges are more successfully enacted.

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PROFILE

The Mercator Forum for Migration and Democracy (MIDEM) examines the impact of migration on democratic institutions, policies and cultures and looks into political decision making processes in the field of migration policies – in individual countries and in a comparative view of Europe.

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